

Chapell, Bryan. *Christ-Centered Preaching*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005. 400 pp.  
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### **Introduction**

*Christ-Centered Preaching* by Dr. Bryan Chapell is a contemporary work on the study of homiletics. It is divided into three parts: Principles for Expository Preaching, Preparation of Expository Sermons, and A Theology of Christ-Centered Messages. The author has adequate experience in this field as he was engaged in pastoral ministry for ten years before being elected president at Covenant Theological Seminary where he is currently serving.

The underlying principle that drives this book is that all preaching that is truly preaching must be Christ-centered. With that belief in place, the author proceeds to explain how all of Scripture can be preached in a Christ-centered manner while respecting the text's context and making connections between the ancient and contemporary audiences.

### **Summary**

As mentioned in the introduction, the book is divided into three parts. The first part deals with principles for expository preaching, which begins with a discussion about preaching and the power of the word of God. It is within this first chapter that a key paragraph is found that gives a brief, but thorough description of Christ-centered preaching. Chappell writes,

The necessity of grace in balanced preaching inevitably points both preacher and parishioner to the work of Christ as the only proper center of a sermon. Christ-centered preaching is not merely evangelistic, nor is it confined to a few gospel accounts. It perceives the whole of Scripture as revelatory of God's redemptive plan and sees every passage within this context – pattern Jesus himself introduced... Thus the Bible requires that we construct our messages in such a way as to reveal the grace that is the ultimate foundation of every text, the ultimate enablement for every instruction, and the only source of true holiness. (40)

This paragraph is crucial to the purpose of the book, and gives the reader a better understanding of Chapell's viewpoint about Biblical theology and its relationship to preaching.

Continuing to the second chapter, Chapell lays out the obligations of the sermons as he sees them. Those obligations are Unity, Purpose, and Application. By unity, Chapell means that the sermon is only about one thing (44). For purpose, Chapell presents a relatively new terminology called "the Fallen Condition Focus (FCF)". This FCF is "the mutual human

condition that contemporary believers share with those to or about whom the text was written that requires the grace of the passage for God's people to glorify and enjoy him (50)." By application, Chapell simply means that all preaching should answer the questions of "so what" from the audience by drawing out the contemporary application from the text of Scripture.

From the obligations of the sermons, Chapell moves to the priority of the text in the sermon. This chapter serves to equip the reader with the tools that are necessary for text selection and interpretation. Chapell's preferred approach to the text is the Grammatical-Historical method that takes into account the text's context (historical, cultural, and literary) within the broader context of redemption. This approach serves his conviction regarding the preaching that was described above. After explaining the priority of the text, Chapell goes on to discuss the components of good exposition. Those components are explanation, illustration, and application. The key point made in this chapter is that the best sermons are those that are equally balanced among all three components.

In part 2 of the book, Chapell discuss the preparation of expository sermons. For the most part, his discussion follows fairly close to other standard works on the preparation of an expository sermon. For the sake of time and space, the rest of the summary will focus on the elements of Chapell's book that stand out as unique in comparison to other works in the same field of study.

In chapter 5, Chapell begins by building what he calls, "The Path of Preparation." In that path, six questions are to be asked of the text (What does it mean? How do I know? Why was the text written? What do we share in common with the intended audience? How should people respond? What is the most effective means of communication?) and four steps are to be taken (observe, interrogate, relate, organize). Once the truth has been exegeted from the text, the next step is to prepare for the presentation of that truth. Chapell calls this the light of presentation and explains it in three steps as 1) State the Truth, 2) Place the Truth, and 3) Prove the Truth. Chapell's material here is common fair with most homiletic textbooks. In chapter 6, Chapell discusses the process of outlining the text and building a sermon structure. This process is similar to that of building and moving from an exegetical outline to a sermon structure. As a matter of examination, Chapell provides a helpful guide for evaluating an outline called F-O-R-M, which means that every outlines should be Faithful to the Text, Obvious from the Text, Related to the FCF, and moving toward a climax (162).

In the next three chapters, Chapell covers the preparation and addition of illustration, application, introduction, conclusion, and transition to the sermon structure. Beginning with illustrations, Chapell explains how “the most powerful sermons bring truth to life by demonstrating and applying textual truth (175).” He believes that the best vehicle to bring to life those truths is through the use of illustration in the sermon. This chapter is more thorough than most textbooks on this subject. As for the practice of application, Chapell believes that it is to be used in order to answer the questions of What, Where, Why and How that linger in the mind of the audience. Application, then, is the target of exposition. In concluding the second part of his book, Chapell gives attention to the construction and importance of the introduction, conclusion, and transition between major points. As with most authors, Chapell stresses the importance of the introduction as an attention grabber that draws the audience into the sermon and engages them. As for the conclusion, Chapell states that many times, audiences are “more likely to remember a conclusion than any other portion of a message (253)” thus making it an important part of the sermon and vital for effective communication of God’s truth. After addressing the conclusion, Chapell ends with a short discussion on the use of transitions between the major points in the sermon structure. According to Chapell, these transitions serve to promote the unity of the sermon in relationship to its proposition and preserve the flow of the sermon (261).

In the last section of the book, Chapell now turns to “The Theology of Christ-centered” preaching. His major focus here is the FCF which allows the lives of the listener to intersect with the lives of those in the text. The commonality that they share is their fallen nature and their need for redemption, but in Chapell’s word, “How does an expository preacher proclaim redemptive truths when a text seems to present (300)?” Chapell answers by saying that “proper exposition discerns the place and the role of a text in the entire revelation of God’s redemptive plan, which is ultimately fulfilled in Christ (300).”

### **Critical Evaluation**

For the most part, Christ-Centered Preaching is a very well written book. My first impression, given the nature of the title, was to assume that it would not promote a hermeneutic that was consistently faithful to the text by forcing the gospel message into every text of scripture. I was pleasantly surprised to see that Chapell’s understanding of Christ-centered preaching was based upon his understanding of Biblical theology and promoted the preaching of

every text of scripture in a way that preserved the author's original intent while placing the text in the context of the big picture of redemptive history.

Another part of the book that I found particular helpful was his use of graphics to illustrate certain points. In particular, the continued use of the double helix graphic that illustrated the unity of the sermon while showing the division of the three parts of the sermon (92). This was a great way to show how the sermon should be balanced. Not only did it illustrate points earlier in the book, but it was also scalable throughout so as to show how these concepts build on and relate to one another (223).

The other area that was a great encouragement to me was very first chapter on the power of the word of God. After reading that chapter, my heart was greatly encouraged and enflamed to fulfill the ministry that God had given me to do now and is calling me to in the future. His discussion about the word of God awakened my heart to the reality of the power of God that is present in the word of God proclaimed through weak and wounded vessel. As a young preacher, it was great encouragement.

In many ways too, this book serves to not only preserve expository preaching in the church, but also to encourage it. Many times throughout the course of reading this book, I felt liberated to preach the whole counsel of God without apology or reservation because of the new perspective on preaching the entirety of scripture in a Christ-centered way based on the text's location in redemptive history. Its connection to the study of Biblical theology is crucial if the truths contained therein are going to be able to be applied. So much of preaching has been guided by the study of systematic theology to the neglect of the study of Biblical theology that much of today's preaching fails to convey the big picture of scripture and ends up depriving the body of Christ of wonderful truths contained in scripture that cannot be adequately explained only with a strict systematic approach to the Bible. I commend Dr. Chapell for his work in this area.

Lastly I would say, Dr. Chapell has done unparalleled work in this book on the use of illustrations. To my limited knowledge, I know of no other book that deals with illustrations in such a thorough way in such a limited amount of space. Illustrations are very hard to come by for me and his instruction in this area was a great blessing.

As for matters within this book that I would disagree with, there are not many. Chapell does not suggest a hard line approach to the placement of application, but he does place it at the end of helix. I, personally, prefer Dr. Herschel York's approach to application which states the

primacy of applying the text both at the beginning of the main point and the end of the main point. Mere explanation could deter the listener from continuing to listen if their interest is not peaked at the beginning of the major point. Though Chapell might agree with this statement it is hard to tell from his discussion and his illustrations where exactly he would have the application placed.

A final area of general dissatisfaction is Chapell's handling of principles. Having been recently introduced to the concept of taking Biblical truth, principalizing them, and then building a sentence structure with them, I have become very fond of them. In Chapell's book, though, only a limited amount of space is given to discuss principles for the sermon structure. I believe that more content in chapter six on this process would have been helpful.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I found *Christ-Centered Preaching* to be a wonderful addition to my library and a resource that I will use for many years to come. I am not convinced that it is the best homiletics textbook on the market, but the concepts present within it are certainly worth the time and effort. I highly recommend it.